

Australian state government declares “national emergency” in Sydney but rejects calls for sharp lockdown

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The New South Wales (NSW) Liberal-National Coalition government yesterday declared Sydney’s COVID-19 outbreak a “national emergency,” but rejected calls from epidemiologists for hard lockdown measures to curb the rapid spread of the highly-infectious Delta variant.

The designation has no legal or constitutional basis. Nor was it accompanied by the elaboration of any concrete policies to tackle mounting infections, which continue to hit new daily records. Instead, the declaration of an “emergency” was coupled with assertions from Premier Gladys Berejiklian and NSW Chief Health Officer Kerry Chant that nothing could or would be done to immediately reduce transmission.

Both of them, along with state Health Minister Brad Hazzard, said the “emergency” should result in a shift in the shambling vaccine rollout, with supplies from elsewhere in NSW and Australia being diverted to southwest Sydney, which has been the epicentre of the outbreak. The proposal was rebuffed at yesterday’s meeting of the national cabinet, composed of the state and territory leaders and the federal government.

All the states and territories have limited supplies of the Pfizer vaccine. Just 1.4 million doses arrived in Australia in June, with the federal government stating earlier this month that a further 1.7 million would be forthcoming in July.

While Prime Minister Morrison continues to claim that a major speed-up is around the corner, the vast majority of the 40 million Pfizer doses that his government claims to have secured are not in the country. Official health advice remains that the AstraZeneca vaccine, which the Morrison government settled on as the backbone of the rollout, because it is the cheapest, only be given to those aged over 60 because of rare blood-clotting risks.

Even if vaccine rates escalate, with just 14 percent of the adult population fully-inoculated, it would take several months to have any impact on transmission of the virus.

The central thrust of Berejiklian’s and Chant’s comments

was that the state government would not introduce sharp restrictions to curb the outbreak, and essentially, that the outbreak would continue for the foreseeable future. This is along the lines of an ongoing campaign, in the corporate and financial elite, for the overturning of all safety restrictions and for the population to be compelled to “live with the virus,” so there are no barriers to big business profits.

Chant claimed that tougher lockdown measures would be futile. Most infections were not taking place in “discretionary premises,” i.e., non-essential businesses, but in workplaces, such as those that “put food on the table for people in Sydney.”

There was “no point continuing taking the time to reflect and look at what else we can do” in terms of lockdown measures, Chant said. “It isn’t that the lockdown isn’t working, what we would have seen if it was not in place would have been skyrocketing, exponential growth in numbers.”

These are contemptible evasions and falsehoods. In reality, the NSW government has consistently rejected the imposition of a genuine lockdown. For the first ten days, after cases were first detected on June 16, it did not implement any restrictions, aside from limited mask-mandates. Subsequent stay-at-home orders fell short of a genuine lockdown, allowing for virtually all businesses, including non-essential retail, to remain open.

Only last weekend did the government move toward greater restrictions, but they were applied to the southwestern working-class suburbs of Sydney. And then, the day after they were announced, dozens of industries were exempted, including some 16 categories of retail, following lobbying from big business and the corporatised trade unions.

Such localised restrictions have failed previously. Moreover, the virus has already spread throughout Sydney. A substantial proportion of cases now have been registered in western Sydney suburbs, where infection numbers were

previously low. The government has responded by extending its sharper restrictions to several of these working-class suburbs, including bans on leaving the area, unless for designated work.

This has a blatantly discriminatory and clear class character. Workers and the poor are being targeted with harsher measures, including a major police deployment, than were imposed in the relatively-affluent eastern suburbs, where the current outbreak began. The media has reported discussions inside the NSW government about localised lockdowns in working-class areas being enforced by the military, with physical barriers to prevent breaches.

Speaking today, Health Minister Hazzard again sought to blame ordinary people in the west and southwest, claiming, without any evidence, they were engaged in widespread violations of the rules.

Such statements are a transparent exercise in scapegoating, and an attempt to divert from the government's responsibility. Under the government's inadequate restrictions, infections have continued to grow rapidly, reaching new records of 136 cases yesterday and 163 today. Some 71 of the cases revealed today were in the community for all or part of their infectious period, along with 70 yesterday, 74 on Thursday and 60 on Wednesday. This compares with a low this month of just three cases that were infectious in the community on July 3.

The government continues to emphasise transmission within households, even though Chant yesterday referenced infections in workplaces. Figures from last week showed that at least 10 percent of cases were contracted at workplaces. Some 30 percent of those unwittingly spread the virus in the community, while they resulted in an unknown number of household cases.

The clear advice from epidemiologists is for hard lockdowns, at least throughout Sydney and potentially across NSW, similar to those that curbed a major outbreak in the neighbouring state of Victoria after they were very belatedly imposed by the state Labor government there.

Responding to yesterday's NSW government press conference, emergency doctor and former Australian Medical Association (AMA) vice president Stephen Parris told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation that hard lockdowns were effective, as demonstrated in the 2020 Victorian outbreak.

"We learned... that if you try to lockdown a few postcodes, it doesn't work," Parris said. "I think that is a bit of a furphy coming out of the NSW press conference... the fact is that the control mechanisms have to be harder and more generalised lockdown."

Prominent epidemiologist Marylouise McLaws said the outbreak "would have been over already had they

implemented [lockdown measures] earlier. I mean, it's certainly better than absolutely nothing, but we're not seeing the reductions happening fast enough."

The NSW government, however, has made plain it will not institute a genuine and generalised lockdown. Instead, the discussion within the government, as reported in the *Australian* yesterday, is about lifting existing restrictions in areas in Sydney where case numbers are relatively low, while continuing lockdowns in working class areas until October when vaccination levels will purportedly be higher. Senior cabinet members previously told the press that they objected to even the threadbare measures, dubbed a "mockdown," that were introduced late last month and have since been extended.

This is the homicidal policy of herd immunity. It is in line with a feverish campaign from the corporate elite, supported by all the state, territory and federal governments, for an end to all lockdown measures, as is occurring in Britain.

As is the case internationally, this program, based on placing profits before lives, is producing a catastrophe. There have been six deaths so far in the Sydney outbreak. Experts have warned that the figure will grow. There are 139 people with COVID-19 in Sydney hospitals, including 37 in intensive care, 17 of them requiring ventilation. Twenty-eight of those who have been hospitalised are under the age of 35.

The outbreak is a national crisis. Victoria recorded 26 infections yesterday, the highest in ten months, followed by 12 today. There are still hundreds of exposure sites throughout Melbourne, the country's second-largest city, and some 9,000 people in isolation. Cases have also been registered in South Australia for the first time in months, prompting a limited snap lockdown there. Yesterday, it was revealed that a Qantas flight attendant in Brisbane had tested positive to the virus, after having been infectious in the community for as long as a week.

Exposure sites and infections are also beginning to be recorded in regional areas of NSW and Victoria.



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